

Column by AIPC President, Edgar Hirt

Client Expectations Driving Need for Quality Standards



Edgar Hirt is the President of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC); and Managing Director of CCH, Congress Center Hamburg



AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognizing excellence in centre management. It's global network of over 165 leading centres in 53 countries, combined with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals ensures a broad and diversified level of industry knowledge and expertise, while its wide variety of program activities supports members in developing and enhancing their skills in the areas of operations, finance, technology, staff development, marketing, client relations and sustainability.

AIPC President Edgar Hirt says universally recognized quality standards are going to play a growing role for convention centres in a future where increasing globalization and rising client expectations will create a need for a more reliable means of assessing what they can expect from a given facility. At the same time, such standards will provide qualified centres with a way to demonstrate and document their accomplishments to a discriminating market.

"Centres have typically developed in relative isolation, with few cities world-wide having more than a single major facility," said Hirt. "This has meant that for a very long time, no universally accepted accreditation has existed. Now, we are seeing more efforts to develop such standards, driven in many cases by client concerns as to what they can expect in facilities and destinations that are new in the market, and in other cases by a more metrics-driven approach to site selection, often by third party planners who need a measurable basis for their recommendations."

Some centres have used credentials that were essentially adapted from other areas such as hospitality or manufacturing, said Hirt, but these generally failed to really reflect the kinds of performance important to the management of a centre. At the same time, there were credentials developed in particular countries or regions, but these lacked the universality required by clients who were regularly looking for venues world-wide because of their event rotation.

For this reason AIPC undertook the challenging task of developing quality standards specific to convention centres. The standards had to meet a number of tests, including a need to be flexible and adaptable to a wide variety of facility types, ages and configurations; to be seen from a client perspective so they were relevant to

the market and to be "graduated" in order to give participating centres a way forward in addressing any performance issues that were in the process of being addressed. Finally, they needed to be seen as having been developed by an arms-length body like AIPC, using an external auditor, in order to maintain their credibility.

The standards have now been developed and address 10 key areas of centre management: Customer Service, Quality of Facilities and Operations, Employee Relations, Health, Safety, Security and Emergency Response, Financial Integrity, Community Relations, Environmental Responsibility, Industry Relations and Supplier Relations. The qualification process is one in which centres must demonstrate that measurable policies and procedures in place for each area in a form that can be reviewed and assessed by an external auditor.

"At AIPC, our challenge now is to facilitate as many members as possible to achieve this distinction," said Hirt. "We realize it's another demand on managers who are already very busy with meeting client expectations. However, it is a way for centres to distinguish themselves for their performance in a way that will be increasingly recognized in today's highly competitive market."

Edgar Hirt

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